

Learning from Triumphs and Disasters

Strategies to help teams learn from a triumphs or disasters

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A team has a "disaster": they fail at their task and they are deflated. They clearly have a lot to learn but they are feeling so down that there is a clear risk that a review will knock them down even further. What do you do as a facilitator to help them learn from this experience?

A team has a "triumph": it is their biggest sense of achievement ever. They are in the mood for celebration and there is a risk that any critical reviewing will seem petty and of little importance because the big story is their triumph. What do you do as a facilitator to help them learn from their success?

These two extreme cases can be quite challenging if your goal is to facilitate learning. Let's explore and evaluate some potentially effective responses, so that you will be better prepared if you should ever find yourself in either of these situations. And if you are better prepared for these extreme cases you should also find that you are better equipped for whatever happens in between these extremes.

Next you will find seven strategies for learning from disasters. These are followed by seven strategies for learning from triumphs. You will find a quick evaluation of each strategy. I then share some thoughts about whether or not we should welcome triumphs and disasters or seek to steer groups away from such experiences.

Learning from Disasters

Let's look at what can happen when trying to facilitate a review after a team disaster ...

*1
You spot ample
opportunities for
learning from
mistakes.*

The team performance is a disaster. The construction falls down. The team falls apart. Everyone feels down. You spot ample opportunities for learning from mistakes. But you sense that spirits are so low that looking at problems will drive the mood down even lower. They might say, "It was rubbish because we're rubbish". "What kind of rubbish?" you ask. And a dreary post-mortem begins. Everyone, including you, wishes they were somewhere else, and that "reviewing" had never been invented.

*2
You smilingly declare
that every cloud has a
silver lining.*

There was so little new or useful learning from this "post-mortem" that it is no surprise that the team follow up this disaster with another one. This time you are determined to take a more positive angle in the review. You smilingly declare that every cloud has a silver lining and you ask each person to make a silver lining statement. "No-one died" says the first person to speak. "We go home in a couple of hours" says the next. "We didn't give up straight away". "We reached consensus that the task was unachievable before giving up."

*3
You give up on
reviewing and will try
to set easier tasks in
future.*

You conclude that it is difficult to facilitate a review after a disaster: talking about problems keeps people going in a downward spiral, and giving them encouragement to be positive is unlikely to work if people are not feeling positive. So you try to avoid this situation by ensuring that the tasks you set in future are not too difficult. Perhaps it will be easier to review tasks with more mixed outcomes?

But perhaps there *are* good ways of reviewing disasters. For example, here is a contemplative cooling down process for building a bridge between a disaster and a whole group review. Alternatively, you can skip this bridging process and move straight to one of the 7 strategies below.

- 1
*Time to reflect
(alone)* Give everyone some cooling down time away from the negatively charged group. Do this by giving each person a suitable reflective task to complete on their own. You can give everyone the same task, or you can provide a menu of tasks from which they can choose one or two.
- 2
*Pair and share
(with learning buddy)* When they return from their task, instead of going straight into a whole group session and risking an instant return to negative dynamics, ask people to pair up with their "learning buddy" to report on their task.
- 3
*Proposal x
for benefit y
(in whole group)* Explain that you would like the review to focus on topics arising from the task that are worth exploring further. Invite statements beginning "We would like to explore 'x' further because this might lead to benefit 'y'". Give time for pairs or small groups to prepare and write down their statements in full before speaking them out.
- 4
Making an agenda Using a pinboard or sticky wall or table, the proposals are put on display one at a time. You now have the makings of an agenda.

Some of the strategies below present options for exploring what's on the agenda. Or you can skip the cooling down process (described above), keep the group together and go straight into one of the following strategies:

Strategy 1: Action Replay – best, worst and interesting moments

Ask the team to recreate "video clips" (re-enactments without real video) of around 30 seconds each to illustrate the best, worst and interesting moments. Use interviewing to bring out more of the story.

Why this might work:

- You are clearly providing a structure for a balanced review.
- It may be fun and cathartic if the group happen to be in the mood for laughing at themselves.

Why this might fail:

- The team may not have much to smile about
- Replays might just rub salt into their wounds
- If replays of positives reinforce positives then replays of negatives can reinforce negatives.

Action Replay: <http://reviewing.co.uk/stories/replay.htm>

Strategy 2: Changing History - From Replay to Role Play

Ask the team to re-enact a scene that they wish they could have changed. Offer them a "take two" (a chance to change history) in which things go better. Sometimes it is helpful to allow planning time for this. Sometimes spontaneous role play works better.

Why this might work:

- Often a team will know what they should have done and can readily make the improvement.
- Doing the changing history as role play means that everyone can take part and be involved in rehearsing this improvement.
- A rehearsal of successful action takes people closer to success – creating a shared experience of success and the confidence and know-how to improve their chances of success if repeating this activity or doing something similar.

Why this might fail:

- There may be disagreement about how to improve things (for which a good solution is to act out all proposed improvements)
- There may be no ideas about how to make improvements ("we did our best"). In which case you can suggest trying out *different* ways rather than *better* ways.
- This can be a tricky situation in which to introduce action replay if the team have not yet had a good experience of using this method.

After changing history for one scene you may want to do it for others, unless this single change is all that seems necessary for bringing about a significant improvement in future work together.

Strategy 3: Missing Person (Wanted)

Allow the group to have purposeful fun while they create the kind of imaginary person who is going to get them out of this mess or who will help them to prevent such problems in future.

Why this might work:

- There is hope! This is an optimistic exercise focusing on the future but drawing on the past.
- This future-past balance can save a group from getting sucked into a messy post-mortem.

Why this might fail:

- If they have just failed at a task due to poor group dynamics, will they fare any better with this task? (Dividing the group into smaller teams usually makes it easier for teams to work together.)

Missing Person: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/ropes.htm#MISSING_PERSON

Strategy 4: Reviewing in pairs (or threes)

Why this might work:

- This temporarily avoids the need to bring a team in conflict into a new team conflict.
- Following team disasters it is likely that some people are feeling that their voice was not heard (everyone is soon heard in a pair).

Why this might fail:

- Pairs may be in conflict unless pairing was set up through a "friendly neighbour" process.
- Pairs may simply "let off steam" unless they are given a briefing that will help them and the group move forward.

Be ready with a suitable group process to follow the paired discussions. For example you may want to ask each pair to write down a proposal to put on display and/or read out.

More options for paired reviews: <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/reviewing-by-numbers.htm#2>

Strategy 5: Refocus from "We" to "I"

Instead of looking at the team failure, focus on the individual level – for example by using individual storylines that trace highs and lows and choices made by each individual.

Why this might work:

- This focus helps individuals to reflect on their own responsibilities as a member of the group.
- Defensiveness is less likely when away from the group.
- Storyline helps to bring out a balanced story.

Why this might fail:

- Retelling stories of disaster may not produce fresh insight or learning, so be sure to suggest a theme for the storyline that introduces a fresh angle: it could be a *motivation* line, or an *effort* line (charting an individual's amount of effort), or a *support* line (eg one line for support given and one line for support received).

Individuals create storylines on their own and first share them with a partner.

Storylines: <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/ropes.htm#STORYLINES>

Strategy 6: Reframe with a larger purpose or wider angle or bigger picture

"Let's step outside this current disappointment and look at the larger purpose which is to learn how to work better as a team. You will have felt real emotions during this task, but the task itself was a training task in a training laboratory. It is a relatively safe environment in which to make mistakes." One process that can help with reframing is a two-sided Turntable for discussing the statement, "This is (or is not) a safe place in which to make mistakes and learn from them". (For a description of Turntable see the [Big Picture Reviewing](#) article)

Why this might work:

- It helps to get things in perspective
- It helps to restate the larger purpose

Why this might fail:

- It may be too soon for people to see beyond their negative emotions.

From this set up it may be a little easier to proceed with *any* reviewing process. A change of location and/or a short reflective walk can help set the scene for seeing the bigger picture.

Big Picture Reviewing: <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/big-picture-reviewing.htm>

Strategy 7: What can we salvage?

If the team "disaster" was losing a team competition, try suggesting that the learning to be gained is the real prize. Set up a prize-giving ceremony in which groups of three make prizes for each other in their own (losing) team. We may be the losing team but we are not a team of losers!

Why this might work:

- Set up well, this approach can help flip negative energy into positive energy. ("We may have lost the competition but we got the best prizes.")
- If there are lingering problems or conflicts at the team level, then a review task with 2 or 3 people is more likely to be successful.

Why this might fail:

- A prize-giving may seem hollow. Any resistance to prize-giving could be a cue that the group would support a more balanced review in which (for example) they consider what they could stop, start and continue at both an individual and group level.

Research suggests that in a training setting, losing teams also lose out on learning (whereas winning teams learn no more than teams that succeed in the absence of competition). See http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/7_5.htm#7 for a summary of this research. My own interpretation of this research is to be wary of using failure-creating-competition unless you are confident in your ability to facilitate useful learning in teams that lose or fail.

Further Reading: Margaret Heffernan's "A Bigger Prize: How We Can Do Better than the Competition" shows how competition regularly backfires, producing an explosion of cheating, corruption, inequality, and risk.

Learning from Triumphs

Let's look at what can happen when trying to facilitate a review after a team triumph ...

- 1*
You start picking holes (or nits) - in search of even better excellence.

The team performance is excellent (and it was a good experience for everyone involved). You think of your job as helping them to produce an even better performance. So you ask about how they can improve ... which leads to people getting criticised for tiny things of little importance and the mood becomes negative and defensive: no-one feels that they are learning anything of value and you start to feel alienated as hole-picker-in-chief.
- 2*
You join in the high five celebrations.

So next time the team performance is excellent, you decide to celebrate. And you do and there are congratulations and high fives all around. People even do replays of the best bits. People feel even better about their success but have they learned anything more as a result of celebrating the best bits?
- 3*
You set impossible challenges so that no team can triumph.

You conclude that it is difficult to review a team success because any attempt to be critical seems like trivial nit-picking, and there is a risk that too much celebrating creates complacency. So you try to avoid this situation by ensuring that the level of challenge is so high in future tasks that no team will ever feel 100% successful!

But surely it is possible to learn from team success? How else do successful teams get better? Here are some strategies for facilitating a review following a team triumph.

Strategy 8: Action Replay – Scenes of Success

Reconstructing the scene of the success involves 'walking through' key parts of the activity under review. This is a deliberate echo of how police sometimes reconstruct the scene of the crime.

Why this might work:

- It is a means of recognising and celebrating key moments and what brought them about.
- Pausing the replay at key moments allows the bringing out of new information and learning through interviewing

Why this might fail:

- Some may feel that replaying the selected highlights adds little extra value (unless the interviewing process is included).

Action Replay: <http://reviewing.co.uk/stories/replay.htm>

Reconstruction / Whodunit? <http://reviewing.co.uk/success/success6.htm#whodunit>

Strategy 9: Charting Success / Recipe for Success

Invite participants to make a Success Chart that shows the multiple causes of success in a number of timelines that come together. Participants then add sticky notes highlighting the parts of the process that were the hardest/easiest, the most and least efficient, lucky moments, unlucky moments, best teamwork, most and least satisfying, what was surprising or predictable ...

Why this might work:

- The process helps to recognise everyone's contribution to success.
- It brings out key factors contributing to success.

Why this might fail:

- It can lead to complacency
- Success factors can be expressed as clichés that do not fit well
- This recipe may not work again – so warn teams to use it intelligently.

Charting Success: <http://reviewing.co.uk/success/success6.htm#charting>

Strategy 10: Comparative Review (a variation of Recipe for Success)

Compare this task with the previous (less successful) task and explain the difference. How did we get from there to here? How can we sustain and build on this success streak?

Why this might work:

- By extending the time span of the period being reviewed (both backwards and forwards in time) you are reviewing the success from a broader context that highlights progress and application.

Why this might fail:

- The two tasks might have been so different that any connection is a bit thin.
- It can be difficult to find the right balance between overview and detail.

A comparative review helps to develop transfer thinking because when one point of comparison is a work task participants are already in the habit of finding similarities and differences.

Strategy 11: Be transparent

Invite participants to listen in to a conversation that you have with a co-facilitator about the problem that you expect to have if you try reviewing the team performance. Or (if no colleagues are around) tell the group about your thoughts and options as you see them.

Why this might work:

- Listening in to your conversation allows participants to have a window on your mind.
- Your openness sets an honest tone and causes the group to reflect on the issues you have raised.
- When participants are the audience this removes the pressure to respond and so can improve listening if only for a few minutes.

Why this might fail:

- The process may simply reinforce the group's lack of interest in reviewing their triumph.
- Sometimes it is best to respect and accept a group decision that does not appeal to you. (At least they will have considered the issues even if their conclusion is different to yours).

It is up to you whether you offer a recommendation or leave the group to decide what they do.

Strategy 12: Future focus

Explore how their recent success can be applied to future tasks. In this spirit, ask the group to generate a range of future-focused questions and use these as a basis for a Simultaneous Survey – or go straight into a group discussion.

Why this might work:

- If the most significant learning is readily apparent then this process will channel the positive energy and thoughts into future tasks that may be more demanding.

Why this might fail:

- Rushing into the future risks missing out some significant learning or risks building the future on false assumptions. So include some questions that bring out critical views about the team success.

Simultaneous Survey: http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/9_4.htm#SIMULTANEOUS_SURVEY

Strategy 13: A Vote of Thanks

This public ritual of trying to remember and thank everyone who played a part in a successful event can be much more fun when converted into a reviewing technique.

Why this might work:

- Compared to Charting Success or Gift Giving it is a quicker and more spontaneous way of recognising the part everyone played in the success.
- Like other methods that focus on individual contribution it helps to balance the natural emphasis on the team after a team success.

Why this might fail:

- It can be difficult to achieve the right kind of tone if the humour becomes embarrassing or demeaning rather than appreciative.
- It can be less careful and sensitive than Gift Giving so some people may feel a bit left out.

A vote of thanks: <http://reviewing.co.uk/success/success7.htm>

Strategy 14: Balancing Success

Brainstorm potential review topics and follow this with a group discussion about how they will choose topics from the list. The group chooses the balance it wants.

Why this might work:

- Encourages the group to step back and take responsibility for the balance it gives to different review topics

Why this might fail:

- It takes time to work through this process and arrive at the point where the review begins.
- As in any process that depends on wise decision-making from groups, you may first need to tolerate some unwise choices.

Balancing Success: <http://reviewing.co.uk/success/success5.htm>

It is clearly useful to have a few strategies ready in case your team experiences a triumph or disaster. But you may decide that your preferred strategy is to find ways of keeping teams away from these extremes in the first place: it can be so much easier to review a team event when there has been more of a mixed outcome.

On the other hand, the strong emotional impact that comes with both triumphs and disasters means that any associated learning is likely to be more significant and enduring than the learning that comes from team tasks with more mixed outcomes. Triumphs and disasters should not be avoided simply because they are challenging to review! Hopefully you now feel a little better prepared to facilitate learning from either of these extreme cases.

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